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ABSTRACT

Oral interpretation allows audiences to make aesthetic, rather than moral, decisions about lesbian literature. To perform lesbian literature, the interpreter should be aware of lesbian literary criticism. Three theories of lesbian criticism form part of a lesbian literary canon: (1) revision (rereading existing texts from a feminist perspective, and recovering neglected texts); (2) intertextuality (producing a text through transformation of other texts, forming a feminist self-definition); and (3) l'Ecriture feminine (writing in French using words that are primarily feminine). This criticism becomes a springboard for the oral interpretation of lesbian literature. Performance of literature provides information on how disenfranchised groups wish to be treated and how they are being treated now. In this way, disenfranchised groups (groups that have little or no voice in society) can improve their status in society. "Trigger-scripting" (using carefully selected scripts of literature to trigger planned-for responses from specialized audiences) is one method to raise consciousness levels within the feminist movement. Oral interpretation allows interpreters to present literary scripts while using their voices and bodies to suggest the experiences in the literature for a better communication of the text. Another method of reading accentuates the power of interpreting women's literature through imitation, protest, and exploring the female experience. Because audiences tend not to be threatened by the performance of literature, consciousness-raising can occur. (A selected bibliography and 26 references are appended.) (MM)

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LESBIAN LITERATURE AND ITS POWER TO CHANGE ATTITUDES WHEN PERFORMED

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Lesbian Literature and Its Power to Change Attitudes When Performed

This essay provides a discussion of how oral interpretation of lesbian literature can allow the audience to make aesthetic decisions about the literature. Ways in which a performance of literature can raise consciousness levels within audiences is also discussed.

History of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism

Interpreters are required, as Breen (1978) and Hershey (1988) indicate, to become literary critics to perform the literature. To perform lesbian literature, the interpreter should be aware of lesbian literary criticism and how this criticism functions to help us understand lesbian literature.

As an area of study, feminist literary criticism is relatively young. When the feminist movement, in the late 1960's and early 1970's, became a real factor in women's lives, women literary critics began to look at the way they were portrayed in novels created by male authors, and many were not pleased with what they saw. These same critics began to discover or re-discover books written about women, for women, to women, and by women. A sense of these books began to emerge as women began to define their works through the then existing literary

criticism paradigms--Marxist-literary criticism, pluralism, psychological literary criticism, social science, deconstruction, reader-response theory, phenomenology, New Criticism and so forth. Feminist literary critics began to add new words such as gynocritics, feminist poetics, English feminist literarycriticism, l'Ecriture feminine (writing the body--a language especially for women), guerille (French lesbian feminist literary criticism), intertextuality, revision, and American feminist literary criticism.

Feminist literary criticism became more and more defined. As Mary Eagleton states, "if the critic believes that race, sexual orientation and class are important constituents of writing, then a criticism which recognizes difference and represents more than a small privileged group of women becomes possible" (1986, 6). Lesbian critics decided there was a need to find themselves in literature. But there was a problem. There were no novels that were labeled "lesbian". There were no lists of lesbian authors. Due to the prevalence of homophobia, the lesbian and gay male communities were hidden to the general public. Only one book, obscure and out of print, Jeannette Foster's Sex Variant Women in Literature (1956), was available. Lesbians in the 1960's and 1970's began the "Great Hunt". By searching women's bookstores and by word of mouth, because every lesbian always remembers reading one novel that appealed to her when she began defining her sexuality, lists of lesbian authors began to appear. In 1967, the first real list of lesbian books appeared when Barbara Grier (as Gene Damon) published The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography.

Lesbian literary criticism was delayed a number of years because the woman critic writing about lesbian feminist criticism faced a personal dilemma. If she were interested in lesbian literature, people would assume, sometimes mistakenly, the woman was a lesbian. An anonymous and/or pseudonymic name was sometimes used. Often she felt uncomfortable about listing scholarly work about lesbian issues on her vita, at least at the beginning (sometimes even now it is a problem). Many lesbians faced (and still do) such problems as homophobia, and dismissal from jobs.

Many women decided that this form of prejudice had gone on long enough. In 1971, Adrienne Rich began to write essays on revision. Jane Rule wrote Lesbian Images in 1975. In 1981, Lillian Faderman published Surpassing the Love of Men. Thus, American lesbian feminist literary theory was born. From the beginning there was a major problem: How do you define lesbianism? Every lesbian has her own definition. Do you include romantic friendships, as, for example, Emily Dickinson and her sister-in-law Sue Gilbert? Do you include those authors that have lesbian characters in their works? Do you include all women-identified experiences, as Adrienne Rich suggests?

This problem of definition becomes snarled. Zimmerman contends that if a text lends itself to a lesbian reading, then no amount of biographical proof should be necessary to establish a writer's sexuality. Zimmerman also argues that if lesbianism is defined too well, writers become excluded and separatism and reductionism can come into play. Critics must define lesbianism in their own terms and

determine applicability to both writer and the text (Zimmerman, 1985, 204-208).

Cruickshank indicates that "lesbian identity per se seems not to be able to fulfill all of a woman's emotional, spiritual, psychological, and intellectual needs" (1986, 109). Rich, however, uses the words lesbian continuum,

> to include a range--through each women's life and throughout history--of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman (1980, 648).

Faderman describes lesbianism as a "relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other" (Showalter, 1985, 206). Zimmerman warns "that many will disagree with various identifications of lesbian texts" (1986, 208).

Most lesbian feminist literary critics feel that heterosexism is, as defined by Zimmerman, a "critical consciousness about heterosexist assumptions" (1986, 201). Heterosexism assumes that heterosexuality is the "only natural form of sexual and emotional expression" (201). Rich's benchmark article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" helped define and clarify heterosexual and homosexual issues. As late as 1983, lesbian writers were not being included in major anthologies. Many persons, such as Rich and Zimmerman, touted this exclusion as heterosexism. Most major anthologies have rectified this problem. One stunning example is Norton's Anthology of Women's Literature, edited by Gilbert and Gubar (1985). In every major

historical time period outlined, the works of lesbian writers are included.

As outlined by Zimmerman, Meese, Humm and others, there seem to be three prevalent theories of lesbian feminist literary criticism. These are: revision, intertexuality, and l'Ecriture feminine. Briefly, these three theories are defined as follows.

Revision. Included in Gilbert and Gubar's anthology is Rich's article on revision. Rich asks:

> Can we establish a lesbian tradition by re-reading writers of the past? The act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival (Gilbert and Gubar, 1985, 2045).

Other feminist critics such as Watson (1975), and Kolodny (Showalter, 1985) have also used revision (or revisionary reading) as a way of re-discovering women's culture and literary artifacts. This "act of looking back", Kolodny notes, "offers us a potential enhancing of our capacity to the read the world, our literary texts, and even one another anew" (Showalter, 1985, 259). If, like Bloom insists, "You are or become what you read" (Showalter, 1985, 259), then perhaps as Kolodny states, this opens women up to becoming different kinds of readers, and people as well (1985, 260). By insisting on revisionary readings of lesbian and women-identified literature for all women, perhaps the closet door can then be opened and never closed again.

There are two factions to the revision theory. 1) Some feminist critics are concerned with revisionary readings of existing texts and 2) others have directed their attention to the recovery of neglected women writers and the establishment of an alternative canon.

Revisionary readings are discussed at great lengths in Faderman's book, Surpassing the Love of Men. In this book, Faderman looks at authors from a lesbian viewpoint. Faderman contends that romantic friendships are indicative of lesbian relationships.

Recovery of neglected women writers is also an important faction of this theory. As Greene and Kahn query, "How will women's literature be altered when the work of lesbian and black women writers is not merely added to but [is] really incorporated into it?" (1985, 23).

Intertextuality. Intertextuality is the process of "producing a text through transformation of other texts and through this textuality a form of feminist self-definition occurs" (Greene and Kahn, 1985, 20). This includes, but is not limited to, "understanding the interdependence of the private and public, family and society, work and home." (Greene and Kahn, 1985, 20). As described by Meese, intertextuality can best understood by using the phrase, " 'thinking like a female'" (1986, p. 43) and "'acting like a nigger'" (1986, p. 43). Thus, the "most pejorative concept in the white male world would be thinking and acting like a 'nigger woman'. . .a Black woman." Another "pejorative concept in the white male world" would be lesbianism. Thus, creating an identity for oneself through the writings of others in a world that condones neither being female or Black or lesbian becomes important. "This question of creating form through

narrative technique" becomes the basis for looking at women's writing through the "deconstruction of power" which relates works to other feminist writers, and provides intertextuality (Meese, 1986, p. 43). Every time a lesbian appears in print, one could argue, intertextuality appears.

l'Ecriture feminine. l'Ecriture feminine is French for "writing the body". French women writers (spurred on by Wittig and Cixous) use words in the French language that are primarily feminine words. Humm suggests that these critics "are all concerned with the condition of existence of a new order of discourse and how language can change women's lives" (Humm, 1986, 53). The question l'Ecriture feminine critics try to answer is: "Can a woman's body be a source of her language?" (Humm, 1986, 53). The answer to this question depends on which author you read. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Monique Wittig, in 1968, wrote Les Guerilles, which almost exclusively uses feminine body words. Since then, the word "guerilles" has been adopted as a descriptor for lesbians. An example of Wittig's use of feminine words is presented by Meese,

> She represents "I" or Je as J/e to signify her break with the alien masculinity of the language and to unsettle the phallocentrism of the speaking subject that masks the female. (Meese, 1986, 129)

Meese describes Wittig's lesbians as "runaway slaves of heterosexism, existing outside the boundaries of the binary opposition" (Meese, 1986, 128). Lesbianism, according to Wittig, can be considered as the act of

defiance and the "lesbian body as analogous to the new text being written" (Meese, 1986, 128).

These three theories of lesbian criticism form part of a lesbian literary canon. There still remains some discussion as to the major definition of lesbianism. However, as Watson reminds us:

> If we learn to read ourselves as well as we read books, we may recognize women's experience of power, our suitability to it, and the skills we have already developed. This recognition may be the first step to taking a share of power. (1975, 118)

Interpreters Theatre and Lesbian Literature

Interpreters are required to become literary critics to perform literature. One cannot perform literature without a through understanding of the text. Thus, lesbian literary feminist criticism can become a springboard for the oral interpretation of lesbian literature. By understanding how oral interpretation of literature works with lesbian feminist literary criticism, we can put both together.

Zimmerman states that disenfranchised groups (those groups outside of the enfranchised: male, white, middle-class) have had to adopt a double vision for survival (Showalter, 1985, 219). Perhaps this double vision contains both the vision of how the enfranchised group treats the disenfranchised and also the vision of how the disenfranchised

groups want to be treated. Capo notes that "disenfranchised" groups within our culture (groups that have little or no voice in our society) "can enfranchise their status in society by using oral interpretation of literature" (1983, 453).

Performance of literature should be used not only as a voice but as this double vision which can provide information on how disenfranchised groups wish to be treated and how they are being treated. Oral interpretation of literature provides us with a way to read ourselves and in turn also offers us the double vision--how lesbians are treated and how they wish to be treated, by using words written by lesbians, to lesbians and for lesbians.

Valentine offers a tool for enfranchisement: "trigger-scripting" (1979, 7). Trigger-scripting can be defined as "the use of carefully selected scripts of literature intended to kindle (or 'trigger') planned-for responses from specialized audiences" (Valentine, 1979, 7). This effect is described by Valentine:

> . . . women and men in varied environments, with varied educational levels and with varied racial and ethnic identities, can experience what literature has to say about the human heart and the human condition (1986, 401).

Valentine gives specific examples of using trigger-scripting to enfranchise groups such as women, the aged, the handicapped, etc. and uses trigger-scripting to raise consciousness levels within the feminist movement by giving audiences glimpses of women's literature.

Trigger-scripting requires an immediate audience response and makes the audience role interactive.

Kaufmann notes that only the audience can say "this person is like me", or "these things could happen to me" (Hershey, 1988, 261). The audience provides the missing or unstated link in the argument implied by the performance: "These people are quite like you and their lessons could be your lessons" (Hershey, 1988, 261). Fisher states: "From the narrative paradigm view, the experts are storytellers and the audience is not a group of observers, but are active participants in the meaning-formation of the stories" (Hershey, 1988, p. 264).

Kleinau and McHughes comment that "performers of literary works are the creative artists who lift literature out of its written form and lend it body and voice" (1980, 3). Breen notes that the oral interpretation of fiction:

> is dedicated to the proposition that the ideal literary experience is one in which the simultaneity of the drama, representing the illusion of actuality may be profitably combined with the . . . narrative privilege of examining human motivation at the time of action (1978, 5).

Hershey indicates that "performance . . . requires the literary critic to consciously articulate his or her response to literature in critical terms" (1988, 273). Breen agrees, noting that performance manifests, "for an audience, the structure, the theme, and the tone of the literature" (1978, 6). The interpreter, then, must be able to

critically study the literature "while yet recognizing the generative nature of the critical act" (Breen, 1978, 270).

Interpreters Theatre allows interpreters to present literary scripts while using their voices and bodies to suggest the experiences in the literature for a better communication of the text. Or, as Breen puts it, "Show me a story" (1978, 1).

> When mature readers meet a story in print, they may say that it tells a story of life in a concentration camp or, just as readily, comment that it shows how people will act in a concentration camp. Sophisticated readers who meet literature on the printed page do not make any conscious distinction between the story as it appears and unfolds before the inner eye and ear (1978, 1).

Watson posits a three-step method of reading that accentuates the power of, as well as providing an outline for, interpreting women's literature. These steps are: 1) imitation, 2) protest, and 3) exploring the female experience. By giving voice to "ambiguity, equivocation, and expressive symbolic action" (1975, 113), Interpreters Theatre can begin to articulate the literature directly. If imitation is the first step in reading women's literature, as Watson notes, then perhaps this means using existing critical theories. Protesting existing social roles of females can be done by presenting alternative social roles, such as lesbian social roles. Exploring aspects of the female experience can be done by presenting the lesbian experience in literature through performance.

According to Pelias, "both understanding the points of view of literary speakers as well as conceiving of speakers in distinct dramatic contexts requires that interpreters, to a significant degree, take the perspectives of others" (1984, 144). Therefore, when interpreting lesbian literature, oral interpreters should be able to understand what a lesbian's life would be like. This is a method of consciousness-raising.

Hershey argues that performance of literature makes an "aesthetic, not moral, statement" (1988, 272) and the audience may have a moral reaction to the performance. Performance according to Hershey,

> affords opportunities for extending our knowledge . . . by analyzing aesthetic performances in terms of their rhetorical properties. Second, performance . . . synthesizes disparate approaches to the study of literature (1988, 273).

Recent work by Valentine and Jacobsen (1987), and others (Miller-Rassulo, 1987; Mann, 1987; and Taylor, 1987) confirms this. Audiences then feel more at ease because they are not deciding on whether one particular lifestyle is more moral than another, but simply that whether they agree or disagree with characters and actions presented to them. The process is likened to that of a silent reader, yet with the impact of drama. Because audiences tend not to be threatened by the performance of literature, consciousness-raising of an audience viewing a performance of lesbian literature can occur. The audience of such a performance is asked to make an aesthetic, rather than a moral, decision.

As noted by Zimmerman, removal of the stigma that accompanies lesbianism requires lesbian literary critics "to associate lesbianism with positive and desirable attitudes" (1985, 210). Interpreters Theatre provides one method of achieving this important goal.

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